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## Reading Parenthood and the Pregnant Body in Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream and Titus Andronicus

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## **Reading Parenthood and the Pregnant Body**

### **in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Titus Andronicus***

In both *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1594-6) and *Titus Andronicus* (1592), Shakespeare explores themes related to parenthood, particularly in regard to sexual violence, pregnancy and fertility, maternity and paternity, and patriarchal control of the female body. The motifs of parenthood and pregnancy connect with themes that extend across both plays – for example, as a symbol of female mystery removed from male influence, as a metaphor for the “anxiety of influence” of a playwright painfully aware of his illustrious literary predecessors, as a metaphor for impending new beginnings of unknown potential, and, by its relation to birth and the cyclical pattern of life, a feature of human existence intimately linked with death. By tracking and comparing the ways in which these two plays, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Titus*, communicate—especially in their adaptations of source stories drawn from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (namely, the Pyramus and Thisbe and Philomela stories)—Shakespeare's plays exhibit a complex dialogue on the nature of crafting what it means to be a parent, provide a vehement critique of the societal tendency to divert blame for patterns of violence and subjugation, provide insight into the ways in which literary pasts inform contemporary social consciousness, and suggest comic and tragic readings of characters' voluntary or forced “metamorphoses.”

### **Nature: Feminized Forces Beyond Patriarchal Control**

Besides reason/imagination, light/dark, court life/craftsmanship, beauty/grotesque, one of the many binaries explored in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is the tension between natural forces and patriarchal control. Natural forces, including cyclicalness, like the moon's waxing and waning, associated with menstruation and ovulation, and rituality, like the observance of folkloric rites, are feminized forces, represented by Diana/the moon, the woods in midsummer, the rites of May and the maypole, and Hecate. A recurring image and embodiment of the conflict, especially that between female freedom and an enforced, or violated, female chastity is the virgin moon goddess Diana, associated with birthing and woodlands. Titania, under a spell, refers to the moon (Diana) weeping and so causing the flowers to weep (literally, to form dew<sup>1</sup>) over "some enforced chastity" (3.1.181). Ironically, in Oberon's jealousy over Titania's focus on the changeling boy, and seemingly, her subsequent abstention from intercourse with him,<sup>2</sup> Titania herself is the victim of Oberon, who violates her chastity vis-à-vis Bottom-as-the-ass. Other of Diana's frequent references within the play often represent a patriarchal-counterforce serving the interests of women, of forbidden lovers, of chastity, and of society's underlings: the "old moon," characterized as a stepmother who wanes intentionally slowly, diffusing Theseus's virility and creating performance anxiety (1.1.4-6); the moon as a silver hunting bow, like that of Diana (1.1.9); the moonlight basking Lysander when he sang love songs at Hermia's window (1.1.30); the "cold fruitless

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<sup>1</sup> Dew gathered on a May morning, according to festival custom, were persistently considered to have fertilizing and beneficent virtues (Chambers, *The Mediaeval Stage* 122).

<sup>2</sup> The implication that Titania is withholding sex from Oberon because the changeling constantly occupies her attentions represents another direct threat to male sexuality/sexual potential, like the earlier mention of the moon's slow waning for Theseus (2.1.28-31, 2.1.62).

moon” to which Theseus imagines Hermia as a nun will chant (1.1.73); Hermia’s opportunity to “on Diana’s altar” make her chastity vow as a nun if she refuses to marry Lysander (1.1.89-90); “Phoebe” concealing the flight of the lovers out of Athens (1.1.209-213), and, the moonlight by which the rude mechanicals will rehearse in secret (1.2.83); et al.<sup>3</sup>

The play’s setting—midsummer in the woods near Athens—establishes a neat geographic example—the magical forest bordering, and threatening, the stable, predictable, ordered world of the city. Midsummer, or “the middle summer’s spring” (2.1.82), also invites associations with folk magic; folk magic regarded midsummer as a potent time for rituals, particularly those of young maidens desirous of finding a suitor and securing fertility.<sup>4</sup> And besides physical setting, the passage of time in the woods is also a threat to patriarchal order. Time in the woods is neither strictly measured nor predictable but instead divided by periods of waking and sleeping, succumbing to natural rhythms influenced by magical potions and nocturnal mischief-making.

Another mark of time, the rites of May, mentioned by Theseus upon finding the lovers, is also the day of his nuptials, the same day Hermia is to give him her decision, the day of a “new moon,” and also the royal “sealing day” (4.1.129-133, 1.1.83-90); in this way, even the patriarchal mandates of Theseus, Duke of Athens, seem to be interlocked with, and even overridden by, the lunar calendar and folk tradition. The “rites of May” traditionally are celebrated by erecting a tall, usually wooden “maypole,”

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<sup>3</sup> In a related function, Diana also appears in Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* in “The Knights Tale,” in which Emily prays to Diana to spare her from having to marry Palamon or Arcite. As for Shakespeare’s plays, besides *Midsummer*, Diana also appears in *All’s Well That Ends Well*, *As You Like It*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Othello*, *Pericles*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Twelfth Night*, most often in references to her wit, beauty, and chastity.

<sup>4</sup> Midsummer is also associated with madness. Olivia of *Twelfth Night* refers to “midsummer madness” (3.4.61).

sometimes with a short crossbeam, and often with ropes hung around the top of the pole to be used in dancing. Some scholars speculate that the maypole is phallic, since the first suggestion to this effect by Thomas Hobbes, but other scholars contend that the pole may instead symbolize the world axis (Hutton 235). During the 16<sup>th</sup> century, under Edward VI, Protestant disapproval of May rites and maypoles led to some being destroyed, but when Roman Catholic Mary I assumed the throne, maypoles were reinstated (236); thus, at least for a time, a female monarch's acceptance of orthopraxic folk tradition superseded a previous male monarch's disapproving influence.

The cross of the maypole is of particular interest if related to Hecate, a triple deity, who was associated with cross-roads, as well as city walls and outside realms, and has been called a "liminal" goddess (MacLachlan). The inhibitions required by Athenian law versus the license within the forest and the confinement of Pyramus and Thisbe versus the permeable boundary of the hole in the wall may well have been matters for such a goddess. As a tripartite goddess—known as "Phoebe," or "the Moon," in heaven, "Diana" on earth, and "Hecate" in the underworld, the goddess was often depicted with three heads—one horse, one dog, and one lion.<sup>5</sup> Hecate bore a special connection to Athens, where the earliest known monument to her was found. Finally, Hecate was often associated with magic, witchcraft, and sorcery, was a virgin goddess who never married—further amplifying her function as a figure of patriarchal resistance, and was also said to aid women in childbirth.

### **Changeling Boy: Alternate Female Histories and Maternity's Threat to Patriarchy**

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<sup>5</sup> Further, Hecate relates also to the personified wall that separates the lovers Pyramus and Thisbe and to the lion figure which is central to the couple's double-suicide.

Titania's "changeling," by his very naming, connects intimately with the theme of bodily transformation. Later, Bottom, as the ass-man, a societal underling having undergone a blatant bodily change, fills the changeling's role, doubly emphasizing the theme of change; both Bottom and the boy, both as marginalized figures, although male, connect intimately with the female community of the play, the former for his undervaluing and unique insight, the latter especially for his human mother's relationship with Titania and the contest over his body. Titania's having stolen the boy from an Indian king—as a female claiming a male's property and offspring and "perforce" withholding him—represents a major female challenge to male power (2.1.26). The term "changeling" usually referred to a child left by fairies as a replacement for one that had been stolen, but, in contrast, the assertion of female control provides an alternate history: this changeling boy instead has been stolen (/rescued) from an Indian king, adopted, and loved following his biological mother's death at his birth. Also, like Hermia in the play's opening, contested between Demetrius and Lysander, the boy's body is now also subject to multiple claims, those of Oberon and of Titania.

The contrast between Oberon's intended "use," and Titania's treatment of, the boy characterizes the male and female spheres in the predictable stark binary fashion of the play. Oberon would have the changeling boy engage in "manly" performance as a "knight of his train, to trace the forests wild" (2.1.25)—pragmatic, patriarchal "use" for the boy, uses designed to monitor and control nature. And yet Titania "crowns him with flowers" (2.1.27), in so doing, including and even ritualizing him through a natural celebration, joining him into the female/natural community to fulfill a much more abstract, aesthetic role.

The history of the changeling boy's birth provides an exciting, albeit fleeting, escape from patriarchal influence for female characters, expressed in the following speech:

The fairyland buys not the child of me.  
 His mother was a vot'ress of my order,  
 And, in the spiced Indian air by night,  
 Full often hath she gossiped by my side,  
 And sat with me on Neptune's yellow sands,  
 Marking th'embarked traders on the flood,  
 When we have laughed to see the sails conceive  
 And grow big-bellied with the wanton wind;  
 Which she with pretty and with swimming gait  
 Following, her womb then rich with my young squire,  
 Would imitate, and sail upon the land  
 To fetch me trifles, and return again,  
 As from a voyage, rich with merchandise.  
 But she, being mortal, of that boy did die;  
 And for her sake do I rear up her boy,  
 And for her sake I will not part with him. (2.1.123-137)

Titania's relationship with the changeling's mother—bound by vow (“a vot'ress of my order”) and sealed together in secret female discourse (“often hath she gossiped by my side”) suggests intense intimacy. The pair share seeing a sexualized *conception* together—the impregnation of a human invention (a ship) by a natural force (the wind): “to see the sails *conceive*/ And grow *big-bellied* with the *wanton* wind” (2. 2.128-129).

The women seem to experience a vicarious pleasure watching the process, and the metaphorical lesbian conception is described in bodily, overtly visual terms, like much of the play, concerned with *what is seen*.<sup>6</sup> The experience produces joy and laughter and, notably, is completely without penetration, unlike Cupid's penetrative arrow, or "love-shaft," which are described in the next major speech by Oberon (2.1.159).<sup>7</sup> Moreover, Titania goes on to describe the human mother "with pretty and with swimming gait" (2.1.130)—conflating the woman with the human-aspect of the conception that they watched together—the feminine ship—which has become pregnant, "rich," with "*my* young squire," a markedly possessive expression that ambiguates how Titania's claim to possession began (2.1.131-132).

The changeling's continued presence in the play informs the male/female tension and dialogue in numerous ways. Primarily, Titania's attachment to the boy is a means of maintaining her relationship with the unnamed woman, as she expresses in the anaphora contained within the final lines of the above speech, "for her sake...for her sake." Titania's strong desire to have a child, evinced by her fixation on reproduction and her apparent lack of biological offspring, is sympathetic. She regrets the "progeny of evils" of which she and Oberon are "their parents and original"—the only, albeit metaphorical, reproduction the two seem to be able to share (*Midsummer* 2.1.116-117). Besides providing Titania a child to mother, the changeling creates friction in Titania's relationship with Oberon, which can be understood as including lingering resentment for

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<sup>6</sup> Relatedly, scholar Katharine Eisaman Maus describes two paradoxical "problems" central to Renaissance women: "On one hand she [the Renaissance woman] is constituted as something preeminently seen; the paradigmatic focus, as numerous feminist writers have pointed out, of the male gaze. At the same time, her lack of interior 'difference,' her lack of visibility, can enable a resistance to scrutiny, since possibly her inner truth is not susceptible to discovery or manipulation from the outside" (Maus, *Inwardness* 191-2).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. The description of Cupid who "loos'd his love shaft" and Apollo who shoots his best arrow, with the golden head (*Metamorphoses* 465-474).



Titania's relationship with his mother. Moreover, Oberon's retaliation against Titania through engineering her relationship with Bottom forms a "fantasy of infantile narcissism and dependency" on the part of Bottom (Montrose, *Shaping Fantasies*) and parodies maternity, i.e. Titania's maternal desire by blurring "the differences between heterosexual intercourse and the anal cathexes of maternal nurture" (Paster, *The Body Embarrassed* 127-128). In addition, Titania and the human mother have watched, from a point of isolation (the shore), the male world of commerce—shipping along Indian Ocean trade routes. In escaping patriarchal control, and, in a sense, creating a child together without male involvement, the women have also escaped patriarchal valuation. The human mother and Titania are "rich" in a way unquantifiable by patriarchal standards, likened, but at the same time distanced, from the hollow richness of mere merchandise, rich in a way in which Titania is unwilling to part, even from offers to buy from "the fairyland" (i.e., Oberon) (2.1.123).

### ***Pyramus and Thisbe: Gendered Sin, Idle Infidelity, and Artistic Birth***

The mise en abyme of Pyramus and Thisbe, drawn from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, is a pourquoi story, providing an explanation for why mulberries are "stained" dark. Pyramus, believing Thisbe dead and having impaled himself, sprays blood onto the previously white mulberry fruit, a process which, with dark comic and overtly sexual undertones, Ovid compares to the gushing of water through a faulty lead pipe (Ovid 4.121-4). While the origins of this ancient story are unknown, as told through Ovid, the tale represents the effort of a male author to "control" nature, insofar as to provide an explanation for it. This effort reappears in numerous *Midsummer* male characters' efforts

to circumscribe the natural world and to cast it in terms intended to advance male characters' agendas; for example, Theseus catalogues Hermia's options as a nun in terms of unnaturalness and sterility: "a *barren* sister all your life" (1.1.72), "chanting...to the cold *fruitless* moon," and "*withering* on virgin *thorn*" (1.1.77). Hermia's choice (as per the patriarchy—commands from her father and edicts of the Duke) involves the male-imposition of a false (life-or-death) dilemma: to make the patriarchy-approved pairing by marrying Demetrius (and abandoning Lysander) or to refuse to do so and then be forced to remove oneself from the natural world, either by dying or joining a nunnery.

The natural world's representations within the *Metamorphoses*—the savage lioness and the stained fruit, Shakespeare draws upon and conflates with other Edenic elements in the play. The mulberry *Midsummer* recognizes as a symbol of forbidden fruit, one which recalls femaleness in negative ways—bloody, violent, tempting, and uncontrollable. Another frequent Edenic element is the intertwining of women and serpents—a classic reference to original sin. In *Midsummer*, Titania is called a snake (2.1.255), and Hermia dreams that a serpent ate her heart away (2.2.155), alluding perhaps both to her sexual awakening/disillusioning and sexual vulnerability in the unpoliced woods.

And yet, Shakespeare distorts expectations by complicating the stained flower image. It is his male characters that are fickle in love, like Demetrius, the "spotted and inconstant man" (1.1.110), and his female characters that are enduring in love, ironically, the same characters upon whose social standing the maintenance and projection of female propriety and modesty depends (e.g. line 2.2.63). In Shakespeare's telling, these women suffer from male abandonment and infidelity. As Helena notes, men have broken more

vows than women have ever made, and, by men, love is perjured everywhere (1.1.175-6, 1.1.241). She remembers also Dido, “the Carthage Queen,” who, like Thisbe, abandoned by her lover (in Dido’s case, “the false Trojan”), commits suicide (1.1.173-174). Titania accuses Oberon of infidelity with his “bouncing Amazon...buskined mistress...warrior love” Hippolyta (2.1.70-71) The play’s reference to a “fair vestal throned by the west” and “imperial vot’ress” who escapes unscathed is a compliment to virgin Queen Elizabeth (2.1.158, 2.1.163), perhaps suggesting both her exception to supposed vulnerability typical to women and her unique separation from the stigma attached to male contamination, and misuse, of the female body.

Besides the stain of sin/contamination, the mulberry of the Pyramus and Thisbe story connects also with the magical love-in-idleness flower, which Oberon, vis-à-vis Puck, uses to sexually humiliate Titania. Oberon recalls: “Yet marked I where the bolt of Cupid fell./ It fell upon a little western flower—/Before, milk-white; now, purple with love’s wound/ —And maidens call it love-in-idleness” (2.1.165-168). Shakespeare, through the fairy king Oberon, describes a decidedly violent, penetrative arrow<sup>8</sup> issued from a male source, an arrow which, falling on a feminized flower, wounds that flower and causes it to undergo bodily change, i.e. staining. Shakespeare may wish to recall the Biblical punishment of all women by pain in childbirth (Genesis 3:16) or the pain of love, which Thisbe self-inflicts by penetrating her own body with Pyramus’s sword.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps even more interestingly, in pre-Ovidian versions of the story, Thisbe commits suicide because of an illicit pregnancy and aspects even in Ovid’s telling seem classically reminiscent of such an illicit teenage pregnancy, such as: the lovers’ relationship is

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<sup>9</sup> Thisbe’s sword-penetration in Ovid echoes lines early in *A Midsummer* from Theseus: “Hippolyta, I wooed thee with my sword/ And won thy love doing thee injuries” (1.1.116-17).

forbidden by the patriarchy (parents); the lovers are inexperienced, naïve, and impulsive (Ovid line 96); the lovers experience guilt and wretchedness and feel unlucky (148-9, 151-2).

Further, love-in-idleness's stark color change, from white to purple, is like that of the mulberry. Within Ovid, the flower's new color connects to the mouth of lioness, red from a fresh slaughter, and is thus also closely connected with violence. Throughout *Midsummer*, Shakespeare connects Hermia to the flower by referring to her as fair and pale. White-turned-red is thus an allusion to virginal blood spilled, the irrevocable (and violent) transformation from girlhood to the sexual awareness of an adult (as after the scene described, assumedly, the newlyweds will retire to consummate marriage), and the menstrual blood of women—another aspect of the “fluid” volatility of women. And, as described above, in terms of male inconstancy, the love-in-idleness is a masculinized “distilled essence of erotic mobility” (Greenblatt 845), which, in the context of *Midsummer*, makes literal asses of men and victims of women.

Finally, in Shakespeare's *Midsummer*, the Pyramus and Thisbe play is performed by “rude mechanicals,” or artisans, calling attention to the theme of the production of art. Supporting the assertions made by James Calderwood regarding the metadrama of Shakespeare's plays—that is, that the plays are fundamentally concerned with forms, materials, conventions, etc. of dramatic art (*Shakespearean Metadrama* 5), these mechanicals, as literal craftsmen, demonstrate the process of stagecraft within a play, re-imagining a work of classic poetry and thereby creating a frame within a frame... within a frame. C.L. Barber calls the use of Ovid in *Midsummer* “playful mythopoesis” (*Shakespeare's Festive Comedy* 122). Barber goes on to note “the general Renaissance

tendency frankly to accept and relish the artificiality of art, [and]...soneteers [who] mock their mythological machinery, only to insist more on the reality of what it represents” (141). The laborious and imperfect reproduction of art-within-art recalls pregnancy—something new, yet unknown, and difficult birthed. And, the mechanicals ironizing of tragedy— or “tragical mirth” (5.1.57)— with their bumbling humor and the focus on the “ceremony” of pageantry preceding the royal marital consummation (Greenblatt 839)<sup>10</sup>— calls attention to laughable artistic fallibility and perhaps also the transience and triviality of human vanity and pretension present in vainglorious art and ephemeral reproduction. Theseus, as numerous critics have pointed out, identifies the intermixing of the play’s fairy world with that of the pervasive Ovidian mythological elements: “...I never may believe/ These antique fables nor these fairy toys” (5.1.2-3).

Shakespeare even points an accusing finger to the narcissism of human reproduction and mocks patriarchal attempts to standardize, to regulate, and to imprint the human/female body.<sup>11</sup> And, by calling attention to the craft of playwriting, the playwright connects his art with the theme of bodies in flux and metamorphosis. As a poet, he “bodies forth/ The forms of things unknown” (5.1.14-15). As he draws from a work he is reading/remembering in translation (Arthur Golding’s), he refers to the transformation of bodies on the stage. Helena seeks to be translated (1.1.191); Robin speaks: “I...left sweet Pyramus translated there” (3.1.31-32); Peter Quince shouts: “Bless thee, Bottom! bless thee! thou art translated,” (3.1.937); and, Hippolyta marvels: “all their minds transfigured so together” (5.1.24), a thing “strange and admirable” (5.1.27).

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<sup>10</sup> “With pomp, with triumph, and with reveling” (*Midsummer* 1.1.19)

<sup>11</sup> For example: “What say you Hermia? Be advised, fair maid/ To you your father should be as a god/ One that composed your beauties, yea, and one/ To whom you are as but a form in wax,/ By him imprinted, and within his power/ To leave the figure or disfigure it (1.1.46-51).

### Philomel Gender-Swap: Rape Re-imagined

In the song Titania's fairies sing to her as she goes to sleep, prior to being magically drugged and forced to love Bottom the ass, the fairies twice refer to Philomel, the character of classical mythology raped by her sister's husband and later turned into a nightingale. In Ovid's telling in the *Metamorphoses*, Philomel is taken from her home in Athens to Thrace and sexually assaulted in Thrace by the Thracian king Tereus.<sup>12</sup> When Philomel threatens Tereus that she will tell what he has done, Tereus cuts out her tongue. Thus, obvious parallels exist between the story and *Midsummer*, both in the play's Athens and forest plots—female violation by male royalty, female defiance, male penetration of, and violent altering of, the female body, etc. When Titania reacts to seeing Bottom, her word choice underscores her lack of agency and her metaphorical rape: “And thy fair virtue's *force perforce* doth move me” (3.1.124).

And yet, fascinatingly, Shakespeare chooses to allow a subtle role reversal. Although a victim of Oberon, Titania controls Bottom: “Thou shalt remain here, whether thou wilt or no” (3.1.135); and, “Tie up my love's tongue; bring him silently” (3.1.182). The binding of his tongue—recalling the silencing of Philomel—is a particularly pointed allusion. Like Titania's “impregnation” of the changeling's mother, Shakespeare enjoys imagining females occupying male roles, but, unlike his playing with males-in-female roles (e.g. Francis Flute playing Thisbe), the women's assumptions of male roles are serious rather than comic. As Helena exclaims, making another oblique reference to the subversion of gender roles through the reversal of the classic animalized metaphor of

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<sup>12</sup> Rape is a familiar theme in Ovid: “*The Metamorphoses* is virtually a series of rape stories that constantly raise but never really confront the question of innocent suffering” (Maus 204).

erotic pursuit: “The story will be changed:/ Apollo flies, and Daphne holds the chase” (2.1.230-1). Not only directly through explicit gender-swapping but also by emphasizing the pageantry surrounding May rites and the royal wedding and the art(ifice) of stagecraft, Shakespeare further suggests the mutability of gender performance.

### **Linking *Midsummer* and *Titus*: Further Notes on Philomela**

In the *Metamorphoses*’s version of the Philomela story, Ovid scripts the basis of numerous later characters and themes in *Midsummer* and *Titus*. Tereus of Thrace’s characterization parallels that of Theseus in *Midsummer*. Tereus is described as powerful with respect to men and resources/wealth, “opibusque virisque potentem” (426) and a military victor (424-4425), like both Theseus and Titus. Tereus’s and Procne’s marriage is a political union intended to align Thrace and Athens (427-428)—not unlike the power-couple alliances of Theseus and Hippolyta and Saturninus and Tamora. At the ceremony of Tereus and Procne, the author notes the absence of the traditional marriage deities who often signified protection of women and fertility—namely, Juno, Hymen, and the three Graces (428-429). Rather, perhaps in the absence of the three Graces, the three furies are on the scene, bearing torches snatched from a funeral and assuming the responsibility of making ready the marriage bed (430-431). The detail portends that the marriage will be morbid, rather than procreative. (Similar imagery is present in *Titus*.) An unholy owl (“profanus...bubo”)—a bad bird omen—sits over the couple’s bedroom, and by it the couple is married and made parents (431-434). Seemingly, Procne goes five years without seeing her sister Philomela before asking for Tereus’s permission to do so (439-442); in order to retrieve Philomela, Tereus needs to give his word to the king of

Athens (443). In other words, the story possesses overt references to female isolation and male control of the female body

The metaphor of unnatural, and at times fiery, consumption, which figures so centrally to *Titus*,<sup>13</sup> appears throughout the description of Tereus in his desire for Philomela. Philomela's description, as Tereus first sees her, compares her to "naidas et dryadas" (453), or, from Arthur Golding's translation:

When (see the chaunce) came Philomele in raiment very rich,  
And yet in beautie farre more rich, even like the Fairies which  
Reported are the pleasant woods and water springs to haunt,  
So that the like apparell and attire to them you graunt. (Golding 578-581)

Tereus's desire for Philomela represents a double violation of nature; not only is he incestuous since she is his sister-in-law, she is of the natural world, and thus, in harming her, he sins against that world. And yet, Tereus's desire is, in a familiar metaphor for lust, like a consumptive, insatiable fire: "King Tereus at the sight of hir did burne in his desire, / As if a man should chaunce to set a gulfe of come on fire, / Or burne a stacke of hay..." (Golding 582-4); "And therefore both by kinde / His flame encreast..." (587-8); "They all were spurres to pricke him forth, and wood to feede his fire, / And foode of forcing nourishment to further his desire," (612-3); "He feedes his flames himself," (Golding 630). Moreover, Tereus wishes he might be her father (and, even if he were, he would still like to sexually possess her): "As oft as she hir father did betweene hir armes embrace, / So often wished he himselfe hir father in that case. / For nought at all should that in him have wrought the greater grace," (614-616).

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<sup>13</sup> For example, see Chiron and Demetrius's lust for Lavinia, the implication of Tamora's voracious sexual appetite, Tamora eating of her sons, Tamora encouraging her sons to commit rape, thus participating in their sexual satisfaction, etc.



Predatory animal relationships as metaphors for rapist and victim connect with themes of naturalized violence and organizing categories of predatory and prey. Such predator-prey pairings mentioned within the Philomela story include: eagle/hare (657-8), “ravening fowle”/“pray” (660), wolf/lamb (670), hawk/ “bloud staynde” dove (672-3). In addition, Philomela’s tongue, having been cut out, quivers at the root while the rest of it, discarded on the ground, trembles like a mutilated and dying snake:

radix micat ultima linguae,

ipsa iacet terraeque tremens inmurmurat atrae,

utque salire solet mutilatae cauda colubrae,

palpitat et moriens dominae vestigia quaerit. (Golding 567-560)

Besides the predation theme, others emerge, including: female resistance and ingenuity in spite of oppression, infertile wombs, militarized women, and flight. Philomela’s promise of retaliation comes in the form of communicating her story: “...Or if thou keepe me still/ As prisoner in these woods, my voyce the verie woods shall fill,/ And make the stones to understand,” (Golding 656-658). Even if he forces himself onto her body, he cannot control the dissemination of her story. Foreshadowing Tamora of *Titus*, Philomela must outsmart physically advantaged opponents: “Quid faciat Philomela? ...Grande doloris / ingenium est, miserisque venit sollertia rebus,” (Ovid 161, 163-164). Because she cannot overpower her guard or escape thick walls, Philomela decides to sew her story and send it to Procne – ironically,utilizing a domestic, aesthetic task of elite Roman women to overcome patriarchal force. After Tereus’s “empty” words of false mourning regarding Philomela’s supposed death, Procne builds an empty tomb “inane sepulcrum” (568), possibly implying the infertility of Philomela’s womb now that she will never marry nor

bear children. When she learns the truth and acts to revenge her sister, Procne overcomes her weak womanly affection by associating Itys, her son, with his father, and thereby she becomes the predator, a *tigress*, and he the prey, an unweaned calf (Golding 806). Procne goes to her sister during the festival of Baccus, during which women in armor take to the woods, suggesting female characters appropriation of militarization usually associated with men. At the story's end, Procne is turned into a swallow, Philomela a nightingale, and Tereus a hoopoe.

### **Animal Metamorphoses as Metaphor for Marginalization and Societal Undermining**

As in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, animal metaphors and transformations are a central feature of the play, and yet, in *Titus*, references to the nightmarish transformation of Philomela replace the comic transformation of *Midsummer's* Bottom; within *Titus*, humans-as-animals are symbols of marginalization and objectification. For example, a Roman captain compares the domination of barbarian enemies to the domestication of animals: "From where he [Titus Andronicus] circumscribed with his sword / And brought to *yoke* the enemies of Rome" (1.168-69). The Gothic queen, and prisoner to the Romans, Tamora pleads: "Sufficeth not that we are brought to Rome/ To beautify thy triumphs, and return/ Captive to thee and to thy Roman *yoke*" (1.1.109-111). And yet, these characterizations are not limited to barbarian enemies and prisoners; the Romans themselves are very similarly described by Marcus, brother of Titus: "That with his [Titus's] sons, a terror to our foes / Hath *yoked* a nation strong, trained up in arms," (1.1.29-30). Oppressive forces bind also the supposedly free persons of Rome. Those characters who are most frequently animalized, however—particularly Tamora and

Aaron—embody a disregard for law. Disregard for the law combined with “animal” impulses leads these individuals then to break societal conventions and, ultimately, to meet with destruction, like other well-known Shakespearean figures such as Hamlet or Iago. The fleeting freedom of characters such as these always ends in tragedy.

### **Unsex Me Here: Un-Manning and Un-Mothering**

Tamora responds to the injustices done her (most importantly the execution of her son) by repeatedly, intentionally emasculating and otherwise harming (in sexualized ways) the men whom she blames for his death. Bassianus mocks Tamora’s unseemliness for appearing in the woods without an appropriate male escort—taboo for a proper Roman woman, and he sarcastically asks if she is chaste Diana, goddess of the hunt. In kind, Tamora replies that she wishes she could, like Diana, turn Bassianus into a stag like the hunter Actaeon, so that he might be killed by his own hounds. Interestingly, Tamora makes note that his temples would be replaced with horns—phallic objects that penetrate and ultimately destroy (2.3.61). Lavinia uses the comment to call Tamora an adultress who makes her husband a “horny” cuckold (2.3.67). When Titus tricks Tamora into eating her own sons, the act creates a weird undoing of the birth of the sons, reincorporating them into her body, as if Titus desires to un-mother her.

### **Predatory Sexual Violence**

Besides the presence of animals, predation is a major theme of the play, which combines the sliding-scale view of humanity versus animalism with an element of inescapability that connects to cyclical patterns of violence within the play; and, as with

*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a royal hunt accompanies a royal wedding celebration, inviting the reader to draw comparisons between the act of hunting and the institutionalized, normalized patterns of behavior in the play's society. Titus invites emperor Saturninus to participate in the hunt, a recreational sport intended to build camaraderie among male elite circles: "Tomorrow an it please your majesty / To hunt the panther and the hart with me, / With horn and hound we'll give your grace bonjour," (1.1.488-490). The classification of animals into prey and predator—panther and hart versus the hound— suggests the way in which patriarchal authority attempts to structure and to regulate human hierarchies. After the wedding night, male members of the court go to hunt with hounds that "make a bay" and make all the court echo, ringing with a "hunter's peal," at, what emperor Saturninus calls the "Roman hunting" (2.2.3-6, 19). Marcus promises that the dogs will "rouse the proudest panther in the chase," and Titus responds he has a horse that "will follow where the game / Makes way, and run like swallows o'er the plain," (2.2.21, 2.2.23-24). The transformation, vis-à-vis a metaphor, of horse-to-bird recalls the woman-to-bird transformation of the Philomela story. There is an uncomfortable way in which there is sport in the act of making an animal flee, made even more uncomfortable as, at the same time that these men are discussing the literal chase, Demetrius and Chiron are reflecting on their own upcoming hunt—the rape of Lavinia.

Demetrius, speaking to Aaron, makes a hunting reference in regard to Lavinia: "What, hast not thou full often struck a doe / And borne her cleanly by the keeper's nose?" (2.1.93-94), and in response, Aaron expresses a solution in a series of gross, predatory, violent expressions: "Why then, it seems some certain snatch or so / Would serve your turns," (2.1.97-98). The language unites preoccupation with the sexual act and

violence with words like “snatch,” a play on bite, and “hit” (2.1.95, 98, 99). Moreover, the natural environment of the greatest number of animals referenced in the play – the forest – seems especially suited to violence. Aaron counsels the rapists-to-be:

My lords, a solemn hunting is in hand;  
 There will the lovely Roman ladies troop.  
 The forest walks are wide and spacious,  
 And many unfrequented plots there are,  
 Fitted by kind for rape and villainy.  
 Single you thither then this dainty doe,  
 And strike her home by force, if not by words. (2.1.113-119)

Continuation of Aaron’s violent imagery appears in the word “strike,” as does reinforcement of the idea of the forest as a liminal space where activity forbidden in the city is possible. The concept of “fitted for rape” suggests a preordination to the events that follow. Having internalized Aaron’s lesson, later Demetrius reminds his brother: “Chiron, we hunt not, we, with horse nor hound, / But hope to pluck a dainty doe to ground,” (2.225-26).

### **Inconsequential Lives of Birds, Bees, Gnats, and Flies**

Flying insects, like birds, represent discounted individuals whose lives and pain are often considered to be of little importance. Saturninus refers to his subjects like they are pesky insects: “However these disturbers of our peace / Buzz in the people’s ears...” (4.4.6-7), and Tamora echoes the sentiment when she tells Saturninus not to worry about Lucius as a potential usurper:

King be thy thoughts imperious like thy name.  
 Is the sun dimmed, that gnats do fly in it?  
 The eagle suffers little birds to sing,  
 And is not careful what they mean thereby,  
 Knowing that with the shadow of his wings  
 He can at pleasure stint their melody. (4.4.80-85)

Besides animalizing and underestimating those who conspire against them, Tamora's words suggest a sadistic pleasure in inflicting pain (4.4.85). According to Aaron's account to Lucius, when he told Tamora of "this sport," by which he means his tricking Titus to cut off his own hand with promise of a stay of execution for his sons, the report of gross violence elicits a decidedly sexual response from Tamora: "She swooned almost at my pleasing tale, / And for my tidings gave me twenty kisses," (5.1.119-120). And, in this and other instances, the romantic relationship of Aaron and Tamora is darkly sadistic. Aaron thinks of Tamora being like Prometheus (who was chained to a mountaintop in order that a vulture might daily feed on his liver):

Then, Aaron, arm thy ear and fit thy thoughts  
 To mount aloft with thy imperial mistress,  
 And mount her pitch whom thou in triumph long  
 Has prisoner held fettered in amorous chains,  
 And faster bound to Aaron's charming eyes  
 Than is Prometheus tied to Caucasus," (2.1.12-17).

The gory erotic metaphor is suitably disturbing and connects with the bird imagery of the Philomela story and ironically foreshadows Tamora's bird-food fate at the play's end.

### Problematic Paternity & “Use” of Children

After Aaron’s son is born, Aaron transitions from a role as a hunter and hunting instructor (to Chiron and Demetrius) into the role of protector of the hunted (his own son). He vows to protect his son:

I tell you, younglings, not Enceladus  
 With all his threat’ning band of Typhon’s brood  
 Nor great Alcides, nor the god of war  
 Shall seize this prey out of his father’s hands. (4.2.92-95)

To Tamora’s hunter-sons, whom he has taught to hunt humans (e.g. Lavinia), Aaron makes his allegiance clear: “My son and I will have the wind of you [Chiron and Demetrius],” (4.2.132). Aaron will destroy anyone who gets in the way of his son’s safety. The nurse represents a threat and thus he kills her, callously mocking her death cries and metaphorically making her a pig: “Wheak, wheak – so cries a pig prepared to the spit,” (4.2.145). His paternity represents an odd coexistence of juxtaposed impulses – overriding desire to protect his son which fosters cruel and inhuman objective disregard for the rest of humanity.

Aaron’s plan to switch his child with a properly light-skinned one from the countryside, easily purchased from the biological parents with gold and with promises of the child’s advancement into the royal family, represents a patriarchal (financial) valuation of human life (4.2.154-158). The child-swapping and surrogate biological child is reminiscent of the changeling boy of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Like Oberon, Aaron imagines raising his son in all-male, militarized utopia:

I'll make you feed on berries and on roots,  
 And fat on curds and whey, and suck the goat,  
 And cabin in a cave, and bring you up,  
 To be a warrior and command a camp (4.2.176-179).

Also like Oberon, Aaron imagines pragmatic, patriarchal “uses” for the boy. Any mother-figure (including his lover Tamora) is notably absent from the fantasy. Other male characters in *Titus* also exhibit this tendency to imagine purely male lines of inheritance. For example, Lucius, in asking for his brother’s proper burial in the familial tomb, addresses his father: “Dear father, soul and substance and all,” (1.1.371). Finally, the element of forced feeding – “make you feed” – connects to a major theme of the play – bodily control/violation – and, more specifically, the final forced feeding of Tamora and starvation of Aaron.

### **Re-living the Past and Playing the Blame Game: Revenge Tragedy**

As a revenge tragedy, *Titus* concerns itself with parodying characters’ attempts to satisfy the retributive itch, asking the audience who is to blame for these monstrous deeds that fall into repeating patterns. Throughout the play, one violent gives birth directly to another. Tamora, in pleading for her son’s life, begs: “Andronicus, stain not thy tomb with blood,” (1.1.116). The bloody path of vengeance leaves a stain. Saturninus tells Titus, whom he calls “father of my life,” that, “of thy gifts Rome shall record,” and when he, Saturninus, forgets the “least of these unspeakable deserts,” the Romans should “forget your fealty to me,” (1.1.253-257). In so saying, Saturninus echoes a central theme of the play intertwined with revenge – that maintenance of control depends on public



remembrance of history, interrogating who shapes that remembrance, controls the discourse, and writes history. The genre itself is a dead end leaving the audience to interrogate itself, “Why do we like watching this?”

In the play’s opening scene, Saturninus and Bassianus argue over the title of emperor. Saturninus – the elder brother –argues in favor of birth-order rights and Bassianus –the younger –in favor of free election. The argument typifies the play’s struggle with established order versus individual action, action that may violate norms of social behavior. The word “deserts,” referring to merit or what is deserved, reappears again and again (1.1.16, 1.1.24, 1.1.45, 1.1.234, 1.1.256). The repetition seems to encourage the audience to ask, what do these characters deserve to have happen to them? What role does human agency have in determining their fate? What role does nature or do the gods have? As Titus and Marcus piece together what happened to Lavinia, they seek an answer for why such a monstrous act took place. Was it the hunt? (“O, had we never, never hunted there!" 4.1.55); was it Ovid’s writing? (“Patterned by what the poet here describes, / By nature made for murders and for rapes,” 4.1.56-57) Was it the forest? (“O, why should nature build so foul a den, / Unless the gods delight in tragedies?” (4.1.58-59). And even if the cultural heritage is to blame, as characters seem most often to suggest, there is an ongoing contest as how to read that cultural heritage. The literary past is at the center of the play, and by shifting the blame onto language, characters create a scapegoat for their own choices. If the characters of *Titus* are to be believed, classical literature so informs and distorts the way that they see the world that the characters are trapped in their own cultural heritage.

### Sibylline Sexuality and Restricted Authorship

Interpretation of the literary past connects with the theme of the interpreted body, as the audience must read the characters and draw conclusions about who is to blame, just as men will read and interpret Lavinia, like an alphabet. Marcus asks (rhetorically and somewhat cruelly since Lavinia cannot answer): “Shall I speak for thee?” (2.4.33).

Young Lucius fumes in an aside: “That you are both deciphered, that’s the news, / For villains marked with rape,” (4.1.8-9). This theme of the interpreted body overlaps with female exclusion from the discourse. Later, following her rape and mutilation, Lavinia must write her story in the sand, and, as Titus points out, her words will not stand long: “The angry northern wind / Will blow these sands like Sibyl’s leaves abroad, / And where’s our lesson then?” (4.1.103-105). Ever the political mastermind, Tamora concludes – or, more accurately, wishes for her male audience to believe that she concludes—that the impossibility of female authorship is determined by the gods: “The gods of Rome forfend / I should be author to dishonor you,” (1.1.431-2). Tamora masterminds the play’s plot, from behind the scenes, from the very beginning (1.1.400-455), similar to the way in which, within Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Philomela’s isolation in the tower and later muteness does not stop her from weaving a telling tapestry.

As with *Midsummer*, and the soliloquies of Bottom contained therein, so in *Titus*, the most socially peripheral and subordinated characters of the play are the most insightful, like Aaron and the clown. In order to contact the emperor and, metaphorically to solicit the gods for justice, Titus has his gentlemen shoot arrows with letters wrapped around them into the court. After having shot the arrows, a clown (with what Titus

assumes are carrier pigeons) appears. Titus asks if the man comes from heaven, and he replies, “From heaven? Alas, sir, I never came there. God forbid I should be so bold to press to heaven in my young days.” The clown goes on to explain that he is on his way to see the tribunal plebs regarding a conflict between a relative and men in employment of the emperor. Titus pays him to deliver a message to the emperor with the words: “By me thou shalt have justice at his hands,” (4.4.94). For the character to be heard by the highest authority, he must go through the proper patriarchal channels (i.e. Titus) and transmission of information attached is attached to financial means. While the clown is male, his carrying of pigeons in a basket links him with the Philomela bird image.

### **Reading the Literary Canon and Female Body**

Throughout the play, characters verbally interpret and gauge their experiences based on their recollection of the literary past. Marcus reads the scene of Lavinia’s rape through his understanding of Philomela’s rape in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. He says, “A craftier Tereus, cousin, hast thou met, / And hath cut those pretty fingers off / That could have better sewed than Philomel,” (2.4.41-43). Marcus understands Lavinia’s rapists to be magnified versions of Tereus and Lavinia herself to be a magnified version of Philomela. In so doing, Marcus minimizes their personhood by allowing them to be subsumed into organizing and generalizing literary categories. When Titus revenges Lavinia’s rape, it is in a doubling act of revenge, painfully aware of surpassing the revenge contained within Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*: “For worse than Philomel you used my daughter, / And worse than Progne I will be revenged,” (5.2.193-194). Similarly, Lucius vows revenge against the emperor and Tamora, recalling Tarquin: “If Lucius live he will

requite your wrongs / And make Saturnine and his empress / Beg at the gates like Tarquin and his queen,” (3.2.295-297). Marcus remembers the literary past as he asks that Titus, Lavinia, and Young Lucius kneel and together swear revenge on Lavinia’s rapists: “And swear with me—as, with the woeful fere / And father of that chaste dishonored dame / Lord Junius Brutus sware for Lucrece’ rape—That we will prosecute by good advice / Mortal revenge upon these traitorous Goths,” (4.1.88-91). In each instance, an ongoing experience is understood through a (distancing) literary lens.

Problems with the practice of ascribing current actions to literary models abound. A female character (Lavinia) identifies one such problem: “Ay, come, Semiramis – nay, barbarous Tamora, / For no name fits thy nature but thy own,” (2.3.114-115). In so doing, Lavinia acknowledges a failure on the part of the literary past to capture the complexity of Tamora’s person. And yet, Lavinia does not intend to allow Tamora’s complexities to create a more involved picture of womanhood. Rather, later Lavinia rebukes Tamora, separating her from all other women: “No grace, no womanhood – ah, beastly creature, / The blot and enemy to our general name,” (2.3.181-182). Titus implies another problem when, overwhelmed with grief, he seeks to comfort his daughter with literary escape. He metaphorically reveals how the characters cope with or, more accurately, ignore, their realities, like ostriches with heads in the sand: “Lavinia, go with me. / I’ll to thy closet and go read with thee / Sad stories chanced in the times of old,” (3.2.80-82).

And besides providing a problematic and flawed means of interpreting their world, the literary past also creates a precedent for (possibly incorrect) behavior. The most obvious example of this is raping of Lavinia, which Chiron, Demetrius, and Aaron consciously model based on the Philomela story, cutting out her tongue, like Tereus did

of Philomela but also removing her hands so as to prevent the tapestry-solution. Titus, however, also uses a familiar story to determine how he should act as father of a rape victim. He asks the emperor if he should kill his daughter: “Was it well done of rash Virginius / To slay his daughter with his own right hand / Because she was enforced, stained, and deflowered?” (5.3.36-38). Saturninus agrees that it was and gives his reasoning as follows: “Because the girl should not survive her shame, / And by her presence still renew his sorrows,” (5.3.40-41). So Titus understands the literary history to provide a clear model and a behavioral expectation:

A pattern, precedent, and lively warrant  
 For me, most wretched to perform the like.  
 Die, die, Lavinia, and thy shame with thee,  
 And with thy shame thy father’s sorrow die (5.3.43-46).

Thus, Titus kills one of his own children for the second time in the play.

### **Re-living and Re-creating Rapes**

Just as other violence within the play is cyclical, so rape seems to fall into an inescapable pattern, recalling the reinforcing patriarchal processes within the play. As an example, before killing the rapists, Titus symbolically re-creates the rape of his daughter by stopping their mouths, binding their hands, and then letting their blood by slitting their throats, having Lavinia capture the blood in a bowl as if part of a ritual sacrifice (5.2.196-199). (Their blood mixed with their pulverized bones he intends to use to make a paste.) As another example, when Lavinia finally has the opportunity to explain what happened to her by pointing to the page of the Philomela story in a copy of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*.

Recalling the story of Io in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 1, Lavinia communicates by guiding a staff with her mouth and writing in the sand. She does so through male instruction, confirming her powerlessness, and in spite of finally "authoring" her own words, is symbolically re-raped by taking a phallic symbol into her mouth. She writes in sand, a familiar trope for fleeting self-expression. The volume, Lucius explains, was a gift from his mother, leading the reader to question women's roles in perpetuating such stories and possible complicit guilt for the resulting cyclicity of violence against women.

### **Wombs as Hell-Holes, Living Graves, and Macabre Mouths**

Throughout the play, the motif of the void, as represented by various pits and tombs, provides a grim and morbid representation of female sexuality, playing out male fears related to the unknown contents and powers of the womb. The pit where Lavinia is raped, where Bassianus' body is disposed, and where Quintus and Martius are framed is described as a consumptive receptacle: the "loathsome pit" (2.3.176, 192), "some secret hole" (2.3.129), an "unhallowed and bloodstained hole" (2.3.210), a "detested, dark, blood-drinking pit" (2.3.224), a "fell devouring receptacle" (2.3.235), "as hateful as Cocythus' misty mouth," (2.3.236), a "swallowing womb" (2.3.239), "a subtle hole" (2.3.198), and,

[a hole] whose mouth is covered with rude-growing briers

Upon whose leaves are drops of new-shed blood

As fresh as morning dew distilled on blood

As fresh as morning dew distilled on flowers?

A very fatal place it seems to me. (2.3.198-202)

The combination of oft-feminized, natural imagery with unregulated liquids (dew and blood) and confusing “rude-growing” covering suggest male distress and confusion related to female sex organs.

Similarly, the voids of *Titus* are often consuming contrapositives to the typical womb. Marcus refers to the tomb as “virtue’s nest” (1.1.373), making a bird metaphor that connects to the Philomela thread. The tomb to receive Titus’s sons is one such sexualized death-womb—a consumptive rather than fertile repository which takes, rather than produces, offspring:

O sacred receptacle of my joys  
Sweet cell of virtue and nobility  
How many sons hast thou of mine in store  
That thou wilt never render to me more! (1.1.92-95)

Furthermore, Titus characterizes the earth itself as greedy with bloodthirst, begging that it not swallow his sons: “Let my tears stanch the earth’s dry appetite...O earth, I will befriend thee more with rain...So thou refuse to drink my dear sons’ blood,” (3.1.14, 16, 22). When Titus prepares to kill Tamora’s sons, he anticipates feeding her with their bodies: “Like to the earth swallow her own increase,” (5.3.190). By forcing Tamora to eat her children, and imagining her as the earth, he revenges the act which he personifies the earth having enacted against himself. At the same time, the consumption is somewhat incestuous as she ingests, in a metaphorical rape, her own children: “Eating the flesh that she herself hath bred,” (5.3.61), strongly recalling the line from Ovid, as translated by Golding: “And swallowed downe the selfe same flesh that of his [Tereus’s] bowels bred,” (825). In another act of earth-consumption, Lucius, perhaps acting as he imagines Titus

would have him act, sentences Aaron to be buried chest-deep in the earth so that he will starve to death.<sup>14</sup> Finally, Lucius does not allow Tamora to return to the earth but instead orders that her body be left out for “beasts and birds to prey” because such a death suits her life (5.3.197): “Her life was beastly and devoid of pity, / And being dead, let birds on her take pity,” (5.3.198-199). Ironically, birds, which, as discussed previously, Tamora considered to be of negligible threat, will consume her body, and, of course, the bird symbolizes Philomela.

### **Hell-on-Earth Fires of Lust and Cannibalism**

The consumptive earth motif parallels the frequently reappearing consuming fire motif found in both the Philomela story and *Titus*. For example, Lucius, in preparation for the sacrifice of Tamora’s son Alarbus, inelegantly cries for mutilation of the young man’s body: “Let’s hew his limbs till they be clean consumed” (1.1.129). Shortly thereafter Lucius comments: “See, lord and father, how we have performed / Our Roman rites. Alarbus’ limbs are lopped / And entrails feed the sacrificing fire,” (1.1.144). The lines subtly suggests vicarious cannibalism, which plays into the later plot and Philomela source story. Relatedly, Demetrius keeps his mother from killing Lavinia by saying that they must instead, “First thresh the corn, then after burn the straw,” meaning rape and then murder her. The agricultural metaphor connotes male control and use of nature and the reference to burning male consumption of the female body.

Beyond the consuming fire motif, throughout *Titus*, there are frequent references to hell, or purgatory, on earth. Demetrius, referencing Seneca, says, “Per Styga, per

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<sup>14</sup> Ironically, the lovers suffer inverse fates – Tamora is forced to eat her children, while Aaron is forced to starve.



manes vehor,” (2.1.136). Titus expresses the collective sorrow in such a way as to conjure thoughts of purgatory: “O, what a sympathy of woe is this—As far from help as limbo is from bliss,” (3.1.148-149). Tamora and Aaron’s offspring, almost immediately after being born, is at risk of being killed as ordered by its mother. The position of being caught between those who want to save and those who want to murder the babe is represented in an exchange between Chiron and Aaron: “It shall not live.” “It shall not die.” (4.2.79-80). Like Lavinia, the infant is caught in a purgatory-like state of limbo. Demetrius refers to Aaron as a “hellish dog,” (4.2.77). Titus claims he will seek hell to find the lost goddess of justice: “I’ll dive into the burning lake below / And pull her out of Acheron by the heels,” (4.3.44-45). Titus cries out against the lack of justice: “And sith there’s no justice in earth nor hell, / We will solicit heaven and move the gods / To send down Justice for her to wreak our wrongs,” (4.3.50-52). Aaron mocks religious sentiment on the part of Chiron and Demetrius. They joke about wanting a thousand Roman women to satisfy their sexual desire. Aaron incorporates Tamora: “Here lacks but your mother for to say amen,” (4.2.44). Demetrius suggests that they pray for Tamora in the midst of childbirth, and Aaron rejects the idea: “Pray to the devils; the gods have given us over,” (4.2.48).

### **Feminized Forces: Tamora in the Natural World**

Tamora describes the pastoral landscape – chanting birds, quivering leaves, cooling wind, and babbling brook – as making mockery of the Roman hunt and its shrill hounds (2.3.12-18). Rather, the hunting sounds, intermixing with, and overridden by, those of nature, become a nurse singing an infant to sleep (2.3.26-27). While the Romans

hunt, Tamora suggests, she and Aaron have the opportunity to create an enclave of lovemaking, re-creating that world of “the wand’ring prince and Dido” (2.3.22). The literary past informs Tamora’s fantasy and her escape is into a decidedly womb-like space – “a counsel-keeping cave,” one that infantilizes Aaron (2.3.24). In typical Tamora fashion, in her *Aeneid* reference, the male protagonist is nameless and but the female character is properly named.

Tamora seems to be especially in tune with this landscape and, at will, even to be capable of producing changes in it, much like a witch. The fertile pastoral landscape Tamora imagines for her lovemaking transforms when Bassianus and Lavinia arrive on the scene and verbally attack her by calling her an adulteress and whore. The once idyllic landscape becomes an anti-pastoral hellish vale: “barren” and “detested” (2.3.93), the trees “forlorn and lean” (2.3.94), a place where “nothing breeds” and the sun never shines (2.3.96), a place filled with creatures of ill-omen –the “nightly owl” and “fatal raven,” “hissing snakes” and “swelling toads” (2.3.97-101)— and parasitic plants (2.3.95), a place with the power to produce death or madness (2.3.104). Later in the play, Tamora brags to her husband about her capacity to poison and to contaminate:

I will enchant the old Andronicus  
 With words more sweet and yet more dangerous  
 Than baits to fish or honey-stalks to sheep  
 Wheas the one is wounded with the bait,  
 The other rotted with delicious feed (4.4.88-92).

Her power to infect is seductively sweet and intimately connected with bodily consumption.

Besides the forest's ability to become a seedbed of sinfulness, nature seems also, in part, to be a co-victim of violent assault. When Chiron and Demetrius rape Lavinia, Chiron suggests that "make his [Bassianus'] dead trunk pillow to our lust," (2.3.130), suggesting he becomes part of the (now violated) forest. In addition, natural elements are used to describe the violated female body. Tamora leaves her sons' to enact their violence, saying, "And let my spleenful sons this trull deflower," (2.3.191). When Marcus comes upon Lavinia, among his lengthy remarks, he says, "But sure some Tereus hath deflowered thee," tying together the Philomela story and theme of violated nature (2.4.26). When Titus comments on Lavinia's downfall and as she begins to cry, he notes that "fresh tears / Stood on her cheeks, as doth the honey-dew / Upon a gathered lily almost withered," (3.1.111-113). Lavinia loses her "bloom" in her father's eyes. Her honey-dew recalls the dew that surrounds the earth's "pit," i.e. woman's yonic blossom.

### **Contaminated Cargo: Stillborn and Dying Children**

As discussed in reference to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the motif of shipping cargo reappears, but whereas in *Midsummer* this cargo is fertile in nature, within *Titus*, the cargo is morbid. When Titus enters the play, borne on trumpet funereal fanfare for his fallen sons and accompanied by Gothic prisoners of war, he speaks:

Hail, Rome, victorious in thy morning weeds!

Lo, as the bark that hath discharged his freight

Returns with precious lading to the bay

From whence at first she weighed her anchorage. (1.1.70-73)

His cargo, or “precious lading,” the bodies of his dead sons, replace the usual freight of trade goods or treasures from abroad. Morbidity stands in for fertility. In another instance within *Titus*, Tamora in an aside voices her hope that Aaron has executed her orders regarding their child and re-employs the shipping metaphor: “Thy life blood out if Aaron now be wise, / Then is all safe, the anchor in the port,” (4.4.37-38). She means that if her illegitimate love-child is dead, she is safe. The metaphorical cargo is, once again, as with Titus’s utterance, dead offspring. Although the words are not meant for anyone on the stage, when the empress asks why the clown is there, he replies: “Yea, forsooth, an your mistress-ship be Emperial,” (4.4.40). The clown uses a pun to refer to the familiar Platonic metaphor for the ship of state. But his comment is also noteworthy as it seems he has heard something from Tamora that other characters missed. Like Bottom, the clown represents an undervalued character with greater insightfulness than surrounding characters.

### **Paternal—and Maternal—Anxieties**

For obvious reasons, proof of maternity is simpler than paternity and yet both male and female parents and their children within *Titus* demand proof of parentage. Aaron subtly alludes to the period’s male paternity anxiety when he refers to “the surer side,” meaning the child’s maternal origins (4.2.125). And yet Tamora also expresses desire for parental assurance when she commands that her sons prove themselves to be her offspring, and retain their rights as such, in their attack of Lavinia: “Revenge it as you love your mother’s life, / Or be ye not henceforward called my children,” (2.3.114-115). When Lavinia begs for mercy she asks that Chiron entreat his mother to show a

“woman’s pity,” and Chiron replies that to do so would prove him to be a bastard (3.2.147). Chiron is interested in not only sating his own lust and revenging his mother but also living up to the expectations of his mother. Lavinia considers Tamora to be a raven—a bird of ill-omen—incapable of having produced a lark—an innocent songbird as a son (2.3.149), implying that nature is passed from parent to child. When Quintus and Martius fall into the trap of being framed for murder, Saturninus reproaches their father Titus: “Two of thy whelps, fell curs of bloody kind,” (2.3.281), implying that (what he supposes are their) bad deeds are a poor reflection on the father. Male patriarchs also tend to appropriate female places and spaces and to dominate or dictate aspects of mothering. For example, Titus imagines himself pushing the child of Rome away from a metaphorical teat: “I will restore to thee / The people’s hearts, and wean them from themselves,” (1.1.210-211). In Titus’s eyes, the Roman people are infants who need to be separated from infancy/maternity and made adult/masculine. Titus also imagines paternalism in the political sphere, for example, in invoking Titan in metaphorically describing—with reference to agricultural fertility—the anticipated prosperity of Saturninus’s imperial rule: “Lord Saturnine, whose virtues will, I hope / Reflect on Rome as Titan’s rays on earth, / And ripen justice in this commonweal,” (1.1.225-227). The masculinized son/imperial patriarch is the life-force of the “crop” of justice. When Tamora refers to Saturninus’s new title, she uses similar imagery: “You are but newly planted in your throne,” (1.1.441), but Tamora often falsely flatters Saturninus for her own amusement.

### **Lavinia: Aestheticized and Long-Suffering Female Archetype**

Titus compares Lavinia to an archetype of Roman maternity: “Ah, boy [Young Lucius], Cornelia never with more care / Read to her sons than she hath read to thee / Sweet poetry and Tully’s *Orator*,” (4.1.12-14), and throughout the play, Lavinia’s role is ornamental: “Gracious Lavinia, Rome’s rich ornament,” says Bassianus (1.1.52). Demetrius expresses Lavinia’s place within the social order: “She is a woman, therefore may be wooed; / She is a woman, therefore may be won; / She is Lavinia, therefore must be loved.” (2.1.82-84). Throughout the play, her beauty and the male desire for/use of/will toward her dictates her fate—rather than any decision of her own. The aestheticizing and “womanizing” serves to marginalize her and to negate her personhood. In the latter part of the play, she cannot speak. Marcus, in responding to Lavinia’s rape, describes her as a caged songbird— a familiar trope for female subjugation, presupposing that Lavinia was caged before the rape ever occurred:

O, that delightful engine of her thoughts,  
That blabbed them with such pleasing eloquence,  
Is torn from forth that pretty hollow cage  
Where, like a sweet melodious bird, it sung  
Sweet varied notes, enchanting every ear. (3.1.82-86).

Lavinia’s importance, as expressed by her father, is through (male) praise of her virtue, the source of his joy and comfort (1.1.165-168). Lavinia’s (male) valuation is a reflection of her father and plays into patriarchal hierarchy. Demetrius somewhat rhetorically asks his brother if they will allow Lavinia to take her chastity to the grave, and Chiron replies that to allow her to do so would make him a eunuch (2.3.136-127). The men intend not only to physically violate her but also rape her of honor in death.

Lavinia's rape underscores the value placed on female chastity and the tendency of male characters to view rape as a crime of men against men, disregarding the actual victim entirely. Even as she begs to be killed rather than raped by their "worse-than-killing lust," she cannot speak the act's name which "womanhood denies my tongue to tell," thus recalling the shame of Lucretia (2.3.175, 174). Her father Titus responds to the sight of her, punning on a comment by Marcus regarding an incurably wounded deer: "It was my dear, and he that wounded her / Hath hurt me more than had he killed me dead," (3.1.91-92). When Marcus describes Lavinia's ransacked body, he does so describing her as robbed of ornaments which men [kings] have coveted: "Speak, gentle niece, what stern ungente hands / Hath lopped and hewed and made thy body bare / Of her two branches, those sweet ornaments / Whose circling shadows kings have sought to sleep in, / And might not gain so great a happiness / As half thy love," (16-21). The loss, as described by Marcus, is to the male community.

Male sense of loss far surpasses any expression Lavinia is able to make. Marcus mourns for himself: "That I might rail at him [whoever did this] to ease my mind!" (2.4.35). Finally, perhaps the greatest victim, at least in Marcus' estimation, is Lavinia's father: "For such a sight will blind a father's eye," (2.4.53). The male "loss" is sexualized in that Lavinia's "lily hands" could once "make the silken strings [of a lute] delight to kiss them" and made "heavenly harmony" with her "sweet tongue" (2.4.46, 2.4.48-49). When Marcus presents Lavinia to her father, he does so saying, "This was thy daughter," as if she may as well be dead (3.1.62). Lucius reacts to the sight of her saying, "Ay me, this object kills me," (3.1.64). She is not a living person but a dead spectacle. Titus compares her to the burnt city of Troy (3.1.69). His further reaction is largely one of

lamenting vain action and grief on his part for having acted on behalf of Rome without reward. The description he provides of having “nursed this woe in feeding life” to the Roman state maternalizes his military career and sacrifices (3.1.74). Male characters suppose that Lavinia weeps at her father’s distress: “Sweet father, cease your tears, for at your grief / See how my wretched sister sobs and weeps,” (3.1.136-137). When Lavinia fails to arouse Chiron and Demetrius’s sympathy, Lavinia asks that Tamora allow herself to be taught mercy “for my father’s [Titus’s] sake,” (2.3.158). Again, the injustice becomes the man’s, rather than the female victim’s. She asks to be killed rather than raped, she asks that the men “tumble me into some loathsome pit / Where never man’s eye may behold my body,” (2.3.176-177). Even at her moment of greatest desperation, her concern is for male gaze and not her own fate.

### **Tamora: Threat to Male Sexuality**

In sharp contrast with Lavinia, Tamora is the antithesis of the patiently suffering woman, a bad mother, and a constant threat to male sexuality. Aaron, in contrast with the Roman male characters, lovingly masculinizes Tamora, comparing her to the sun rather than the moon: “As when the golden sun salutes the morn / And, having gilt the ocean with his beams, / Gallops the zodiac in his glistening coach / And over looks the highest peer hills, / So Tamora,” (2.1.5-9). Tamora identifies and openly reports Roman/patriarchal hypocrisy, as, for example, when she cries: “O cruel irreligious piety!” when Titus condemns her son to be killed in a religious sacrifice to his own deceased sons. The oxymoronic phrase “irreligious piety” succinctly cuts to the heart of Roman hypocrisy. Tamora also—immediately after having revealed her plot to get her revenge



against Roman patriarch Titus— falsely declares herself to be “incorporate in Rome,” bodily belonging to the empire, conquered and staked out like a new territorial acquisition (1.1.459). Tamora mocks her husband Saturninus and Titus: “Lord of my life, commander of my thoughts, / Calm thee, and bear the faults of Titus’ age, / Th’ effects of sorrow for his valiant sons / Whose loss hath pierced him deep and scarred his heart,” (4.4.28-30). Her hyperbolic titlature for Saturninus is undercut by the verb “bear,” a word which recalls the childbearing from which she has just recently re-emerged. She further— with spurious sympathy—reminds everyone present of Titus’s “pierced” state, having lost his sons, metaphorically publically penetrating him. In her subsequent aside, she inwardly smirks at the accomplishment: “But, Titus I have touched thee to the quick,” (4.4.36). She would jab him as deeply as possible. Tamora’s forcible penetration of Titus persists:

If Tamora entreats him, then he will,  
 For if I can smooth and fill his aged ears  
 With golden promises that, were his heart  
 Almost impregnable, his old ears deaf,  
 Yet should both ear and heart obey my tongue (4.4.94-98).

Tamora has her way with Titus even though he was “almost impregnable.” She exploits his vulnerability.

Roman male characters respond to the threat by attempting to diminish Tamora through her sexuality, reflecting those male characters preoccupation and fear associated with her sexuality. For example, in an explicit reference, Titus refers to the “good turn” whereby Tamora is now beholden to Saturninus (1.1.393-394). Titus insinuates that

Tamora controls Saturninus through sex: “She’s [Tamora’s] with the lion [Saturninus] deeply still in league, / And lulls him whilst she playeth on her back, / And when he sleeps will she do what she list,” (4.1.97-99). Lucius describes Tamora’s son as “the base fruit of her burning lust,” (5.1.43). Lucius describes Tamora as that “most insatiate and luxurious woman,” (5.1.88).

Tamora herself notes that the Roman state/Titus would like to use her in an aesthetic display of control and power: “...we are brought to Rome / To beautify thy triumphs,” (1.1.109-110). Saturninus appreciates Tamora for her light complexion: a “fair queen” who is “of the hue / That I [Saturninus] would choose were I to choose anew” (1.1.261-2). He later compares her with Phoebe, saying that she overshines all the other women in Rome (1.1.314-316). Male color-obsession may indicate a desire to find an outward marker of female sexuality. A comparison to Phoebe, associated with the moon, which often connotes “womanly” fickleness, is ironic given that Saturninus has just changed his mind about his bride. Marcus also refers to the queen as “subtle,” meaning cunning, when in fact her fate up to that point has been entirely determined by the male characters around her (1.1.389).

As a mother, Tamora represents a complex mix of incestuous and maternal impulses; she is characterized as partly animal and partly paternal. As Titus world crumbles, he mourns: “That Rome is but a wilderness of tigers? / Tigers must prey, and Rome affords no prey / But me and mine,” (3.1.53-55). Tamora, the tiger cubs’ dam reigns over the play at this point. Later she is described again as the “dam” to bear-whelps and, her sons with her, “a pair of cursed hell-hounds and their dam” (4.1.95-96, 5.2.144).

And yet, Tamora parallels her maternal feelings with Titus's paternal ones, suggesting an equality of feeling:

Victorious Titus, rue the tears I shed –  
 A mother's tears in passion for her son—  
 And if thy sons were ever dear to thee,  
 O, think my son to be as dear to me!" (1.1.105-108)

A few lines later, Tamora also pairs her (children's) patriotic piety and Titus's: "O, if to fight for king and commonweal / Were piety in thine, it is in these, " (1.1.114-115). But Titus is unsympathetic and still orders her son be executed. When Tamora bears Aaron's child, the child is detested by all but Aaron, associating her with an uncontrolled "bad" fertility. When Tamora answers emperor Saturninus's demand—"proposition" of marriage, she replies that she "will a handmaid be to his desires, / A loving nurse, a mother to his youth," (1.1.328-329). Tamora, in so saying, implies a generational age gap between herself and Saturninus. She also establishes a sort of mother/son pairing between herself and the emperor—a sort of surrogate son to replace the one she has just lost, similar to Titania's embrace of Bottom. She, as a maternal force, has the power to potentially displace the patriarchal head of the play, similar to the way in which the pit and its contents have the power to infantilize men. Quintus fears, "O, tell me who it is, for ne'er till now / Was I a child to fear I know not what," (2.3.220-221). In addition, the sexuality of Tamora's sons is an extension of the mother, as represented by phallic sword-imagery. Chiron: "And that my sword upon thee shall approve, / And plead my passions for Lavinia's love," and Demetrius: "Why, boy, although our mother, unadvised, / Gave you a dancing-rapier by your side / Are you so desperate grown to threat your friends?"

(2.1.35-36, 2.1.38-40).<sup>15</sup> Aaron corroborates the maternal origin of the men's lust: "That coddling spirit had they from their mother, / As sure a card as ever won the set," (5.1.99-101).

### **Responsibility for Bodily Mutilation**

Hacked and mutilated bodies abound, and their treatment represents both patriarchal unawareness of responsibility and anxiety related to a potential return to the womb.

Throughout the play are oblique references to the body being broken or cut, for example: "These words are razors to my wounded heart," (1.1.311). Lavinia's tongue is cut out and her hands chopped off; Titus sacrifices his own hand in an attempt to save his sons; Alarbus is hacked into pieces and piled onto a pyre; etc. These people, like the state body of Rome, need to be re-formed, re-knit. Marcus asks that Titus assume position of emperor and thereby "help to set a head on headless Rome" (1.1.186); at the play's end, Marcus addresses his countrymen:

"You sad-faced men, people and sons of Rome,  
By uproars severed, as flight of fowl  
Scattered by winds and high tempestuous gusts,  
O, let me teach you how to knit again  
This scattered corn into one mutual sheaf,  
These broken limbs again into one body," (5.3.69-71).

The "flight of fowl" of birds seeking shelter in a storm recalls the hunters intention to force their prey to "run like swallows o'er the plain," (2.2.24). Hypocritically, these characters view themselves and the state as victims—even though most of them have

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<sup>15</sup> Such sword wooing recalls that of Theseus and Hippolyta.

participated in reinforcing cycles of violence. Both Saturninus and Bassianus imply the other has perpetrated a “rape” (1.1.400, 1.1.402). And the characters maintain the intention of reknitting the hackneyed—lest they be returned to the mother-earth. Aaron attempts to reconcile Chiron and Demetrius with their new half-brother by reminding them of a shared maternal source: “He is your brother, lords, sensibly fed / Of that self blood that first gave life to you, / And from that womb where you imprisoned were / He is enfranchised and come to light,” (4.2.121-124). Not only did all three “feed” of the same blood but were all “imprisoned” in the same womb. Aaron’s sentence, intended to be as severe as possible, is live partial-burial.

## Conclusion

In *Titus* back-to-back scenes of death/war and marriage interlace the concepts, very similar to the way in which marriage and war are combined in the conquered-in-war Hippolyta or love-drugged Athenians in *Midsummer*. In spite of the fact that characters reassert a cycle of violence and regret the wake of destruction it produces, both *Titus* and *Midsummer* end with a sense of irresolution. In *Titus*, there is a sense that history will repeat itself. For, only the classic Ovidian text will remain—a text used, within the play, as a manual to rape. The real victim’s story will be lost: “The angry northern wind / Will blow these sands like Sibyl’s leaves abroad, / And where’s our lesson then?” (4.1.103-105). When Titus quotes Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, he does so to say that the world lacks justice: “Terras Astraea reliquit,” (4.3.4). The goddess of justice has abandoned the lands. In response, Titus suggests the earth be penetrated in order to reach the underworld: “’Tis you must dig with mattock and with spade / And pierce the inmost centre of the earth,”

(4.3.11-12). But such a response sounds a lot like sexual violence in that Titus would have his successors “pierce the inmost centre of the earth.” In *Midsommer*, a comedy, couples are paired but questions of agency and will linger. In terms of pregnancy and parenthood, the audience is forced to interrogate itself as to who bears responsibility for informing the views of its children, who takes responsibility for the nature of children and from whence does this nature come. The transformative elements of the Ovid stories—Thisbe’s blood becoming an eternal part of the mulberry, Philomela “escaping” as a songbird—ask what change takes place in the human heart upon becoming a parent.

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